DEPICTIONS OF BLACK LOVE IN *EBONY* MAGAZINE

Alexandra Odom

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Approved by:

Claude Clegg

William Sturkey

Katherine Turk

ABSTRACT

Alexandra Odom: Depictions of Black Love in *Ebony* Magazine
(Under the direction of Claude Clegg)

The ten years between 1979 and 1989 signaled a significant shift in the discourse about the "crisis of the black family", and proposed solutions to this crisis. Public discourse aimed at finding a solution to this “crisis” resulted in wide-ranging criticism of black family dynamics. Throughout the decade, the increased number of features about dating to marry, maintaining a successful marriage, and advertisements that showcased middle class black family life work to highlight *Ebony's message* that black romantic love was the key to the success of the black community. *Ebony’s* emphasis on the importance of black heteronormative romantic love often ignored the larger structural forces that contributed to the famed "crisis". As historians have dedicated increased attention to the study of black marriages and the black family in recent years, studies of popular depictions of black love in print media are a valuable addition to these growing conversations.

To my parents.

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INTRODUCTION: BLACK LOVE AS A MAJOR CONCERN IN BLACK POPULAR DISCOURSE

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been an outpouring of sources seeking to investigate the state of black love and relationships. From movies like *Deliver Us from Eva, Act Like A Lady Think Like A Man, Why did I Get Married,* and *Nappily Ever After,* to the work of self-proclaimed "self-help experts" such as Steve Harvey and Hill Harper, there has been constant conversation about the state of black romantic relationships. Most of these conversations, however, are short sighted and fail to connect modern-day conversations to the long history of discourse about black love and black families, or larger societal structures that impact black romantic relationships.

For decades the inner lives of black couples and black families have not been studied to the same extent as their white counterparts, yet still remained a part of popular discourse. In the instances where they have been studied, however, they have often been misunderstood as research focuses on a limited source of data and situations that are often the exception rather than representative of the norm. In recent decades, historians and social scientists have begun to make up for lost time. Yet in the 1980's, much of the research perpetuated myths about the black family, and falsely represented the reality of black relationships.[1] Many histories of African Americans follow a "racial protocol," reducing their lives to racial politics and failing to focus on the individual and their intimate relationships.[2] It is for this reason that black romantic

[1]Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were : American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 236.

[2]Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

relationships and the black family in the 1980s are important topics of study. The culture of dissemblance that encouraged black Americans to hide their inner lives, combined with neglect from white media sources at the time, requires that historians continue to revisit this time period and uncover meaningful connections.[3] Therefore, black love is a major area of study that requires more attention from historians.

The 1980s was a key decade in the depictions of black love and relationships in *Ebony* magazine. In this decade, faced with a perceived "crisis of the black family," *Ebony's* editorial staff took great strides to provide its readers with the tools to resurrect the black family in crisis. Not only is this decade important because of the social rhetoric about black families that was a common occurrence in public discourse, but also because of the new ways *Ebony* addressed the issue. Between the years of 1980 and 1990, *Ebony* magazine continued and added regular features targeted at instructing readers how to enter into and maintain healthy black romantic relationships, and in turn healthy black families. The introduction of an annual black love issue, continuation and expansion of annual bachelor and bachelorette features, the beginning of the *Ebony Advisor,* and targeted advertising can be understood as burgeoning effort towards saving the black family.

Depictions of black love in black magazines are an important area of study. As the most successful magazine published, edited, and consumed by black audiences, the messages and stories published in the *Ebony* were paramount. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, "mass media images of Black masculinity and Black femininity can have an especially pernicious effect on

[3]Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14 (1989): 912–20; Anastasia Carol Curwood, *Stormy Weather : Middle-Class African American Marriages between the Two World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

how Black men and women perceive one another."[4] In the case of *Ebony* magazine, this also holds true for the way that mass media images of black relationships affect the aspirations and goals of its black readership. Though optimistic and positive depictions of black love, romance, and relationships were at the core of *Ebony's* mission in the 1980s, the prescriptive advice of its authors and featured experts consistently failed to provide a deep analysis of the true roots of what they considered to be the most pressing issues black families faced. Studying *Ebony* in this time period allows us a deeper insight into the romantic lives of black couples, but also sheds light on how the publication and its authors were encouraging readers to *think* about black love.

Throughout the ten-year period from 1980-1990, *Ebony* magazine sought to provide prescriptive advice to its readers in order to address the crisis of the black family in three key ways. First, they provided advice on how to date. Since healthy romantic relationships were the foundation of the ideal black family, the obvious starting point would be finding the right partner and courting with the intent to marry. Secondly, *Ebony* published advice from a range of "experts" that spoke directly to married couples. These "experts" ranged from those formally educated to be psychologists, researchers, and therapists, to celebrity and everyday couples who were all too happy to divulge their secrets and tips on how to sustain a loving, lasting union. Thirdly, in addition to written content, the numerous advertisements, often making up about 50% of each issue, provided a visual representation of black middle-class heteronormative relationships for readers to aspire to. Together, these three elements showcase *Ebony's* increasing commitment throughout the decade to improving the health of black heterosexual romantic relationships, because these relationships were believed to be the starting point for healthy black families. The dating advice, marriage advice, and depictions of romantic love in

[4]Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 255.

Ebony magazine during the 1980's exemplifies the power of the publication to reflect and impact popular discourse on black romantic love and relationships.

Mainstream Discourse About the Black Family in the Twentieth Century

Over the course of the twentieth century there have been notable trends in the discourse among social scientists about the black family. After the end of slavery and into the twentieth century, many social scientists sought to prove that because blacks were racially inferior, they were incapable and undeserving of participation in mainstream society. In the 1910s, these ideas shifted as scholars began to argue that slavery and discrimination resulted in the psychological degeneration of African Americans. This suggested that racial separation was helpful, as it shielded blacks from the trauma of racial prejudice. These first fifty years of scholarship post-emancipation were dominated by conservative scholars, but in the interwar period liberal experts shifted the conversation. Many liberals believed that because discrimination had the potential to be so psychologically damaging, separation was even more harmful. In the postwar period, pathologizing the black family and a focus on the negative effects of discrimination were used as a tool for liberals hoping to ignite the pity of white Americans and gain traction in the fight for public programs that could remedy these effects.[5]

Damage imagery, or the narrative that the black family was adversely affected by racism and discrimination in the aftermath of slavery, was used in different ways by both conservatives employing it to justify their racism and liberals hoping to garner white sympathy. By the mid-twentieth century, the middle class began to believe the government had a responsibility to ensure the health and well-being of its citizens. Therefore, the harmful aspects that existed in black families were to be an issue of national concern. It is in this vein that Daniel Patrick

[5]Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xii.

Moynihan created his "Report on the Negro Family" in 1965. Moynihan urged readers that something must be done to mitigate the damaging effects that slavery and discrimination had on black communities. The report concluded that the negative behaviors of lower-class African Americans in urban settings could be attributed to "marital instability," stating that "the fundamental problem…is that of family structure."[6]

Though a racial liberal whose intent was to provide help to black families and communities, Moynihan's work was interpreted as a study that essentially blamed black Americans for the problems that existed within their communities, tracing them back to the changing dynamics of the black family.[7] The original aim of the report was to convince political officials that civil rights legislation was not enough to solve the problems that many black families faced. However, conservatives weaponized the negative aspects of black families that appeared in the document.[8] At the time when American society relied on the work of "experts" to explain American behavior, the Moynihan Report was given even more credence.

The impact of the report only intensified in the aftermath of the Watts Riots. In August 1965, months after the report was published, the traffic stop of an African American driver in Los Angeles, California, turned violent, sparking days of protests. Rioting by black residents in the Watts neighborhood ensued and lasted several days, only coming to an end after the California National Guard was called in. The Moynihan Report provided ample ammunition for conservatives who used the findings of the report to explain the rioter's behavior. For many

[6]Tera W. Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock : Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017): [6]The Negro Family, the Case for National Action. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1965.

[7] Darryl Scott identifies racial liberals as those who "used damage imagery primarily to justify policies of inclusion and rehabilitation". Racial liberals often emphasized damaging effects discrimination had on African Americans, and were willing to stress these impacts in an effort to force broader political change. Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 12. "[8]James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough : The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life : From LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 49.

watching from all over the country, the looting and rioting of black residents only confirmed the aspects of the report that suggested the declining rate of two parent households in African American families led to degenerate behaviors. In short, the violent actions of the citizens in Watts were a result of unhealthy family dynamics in black homes. In the discussions that followed, "the image of the black family as the source of psychological and social pathology loomed large."[9]

By the 1980s, the rise of the liberal scholarship reinvigorated the use of black pathology, and once again black intellectuals were pointing to the family and drew correlations between strong families and successful African Americans. The broader contemporary discussion of the black family in the 1980s was a result of the century-long trend of the discourse about the crisis of the black family. In just about every decade since the American Revolution there has been some attempt to justify the "decline" of the black family. In 1844, Secretary of State John Calhoun claimed Northern blacks lacked family virtues and required the paternal guidance of a slave master. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was claimed that American blacks knew no more about marriage than common farm animals. By the 1930s E. Franklin Frazier put forth the notion that "the Negro family…went to pieces in the general breakup of the plantation."[10] Frazier was not alone in his thinking. Many historians agreed with his sentiment that lack of slave-master paternalism left African Americans doomed.[11]

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[9]Scott, *Contempt and Pity,* 156.

[10]Herbert Gutman, "Persistent Myths About the Afro-American Family," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1975): 188.

[11]See George Fitzhugh, "Camp Lee and the Freedmen's Bureau," DeBow's Review, II (1866), 346-35; Allan Conway, *Reconstruction of Georgia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1966),

On a national scale, social scientists and politicians were beginning to argue that structural factors were not what needed to change, but stronger family dynamics would have the largest impact.[12] By the end of the 1980s, various stakeholders were blaming systemic issues on the decline of the family. The National Association of Elementary School Principal's president Samuel Sava argued that rather than focus on enhancing the quality of teachers, curriculum, and written material, the primary focus should be on "parent reform." Similarly, representatives of the Heritage Foundation expressed that across political lines it was becoming clear that familial stability was the key to solving America's troubles. One columnist even went as far as to question what the point of educational reform was when "the real key to educational performance is whether a child comes from a two-parent family."[13] These claims were widely critiqued by historians in the mid-1900s, and eventually historians began producing narratives that directly challenged the works of scholars like Frazier.[14]

In the aftermath of the Moynihan Report, both conservatives and liberals were in support of reform of national welfare programs, especially the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In the 1960s, many conservatives argued that the program needed to be reformed because it was encouraging its recipients to bear illegitimate children and avoid looking for work. Liberals supported reform not only because the assistance given to families greatly varied across the country, but they also believed that even the maximum benefits were not enough to fully support those in need. Another point of contention was that in most states households with two unemployed parents were denied benefits, providing an incentive for the father to leave the

[12]Coontz, *The Way We Never Were,* 256.

[13]Richard Whitmore, "Way to Aid Education May Be to Aid Families" and "Marriage Helps End Poverty," Gannett News Service, *Olympian,* 24 June 1991, p. A2 as quoted in Coontz, *The Way We Never Were,* .

[14]Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough,* 134.

home.[15] By the end of Richard Nixon's presidency, there had been wins and losses in national government when Congress went toe to toe over the proposed increases in welfare programs such as the Family Assistance Program. Ultimately, however, many programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Food Stamps were expanded, providing more options for lower income families in need of assistance.

By the 1980s, researchers had the ability to draw on the previous decades of evidence to assess the usefulness of welfare programs, and their results were often less than thrilling. National politics had grown to be more conservative and works like Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* were able to trace the outcomes of families who had received welfare benefits over the preceding decade. The data showed that significant numbers of these children had grown up to follow the fate of their parents, ending up the parents of illegitimate children, high school drop outs, or in prison.[16] These statistics only fueled the conservative attacks against lower-class citizens and allowed Murray to argue that welfare was the cause of "an increase in family breakdown among the poor."[17] President Ronald Reagan also played a significant role in the conservative attack on welfare programs, as he told the falsified stories of the "welfare queen" abusing public services, and a food-stamps recipient eating T-bone steaks, to critique the nation's welfare policies.[18] This assault combined with the exaggerated media depictions of "crack mothers," directly led to changes in public policy, as the public began to associate these

[15]*Ibid.,* 117.

[16]*Ibid.,* 140.

[17]Douglas C. Rossinow, *The Reagan Era : A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 143.

[18]"Looking Back: Ronald Reagan, a Master of Racial Polarization," Journal *of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 58 (2007): 33-36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25073820.

stereotypes with poor African Americans and cast them as undeserving of social services.[19] Perceived racial distinctions resulted in the dismantling of public assistance programs, as recipients were deemed unworthy.[20]

The policies of the Reagan administration further emphasize the importance of the 1980s in the history of discourse surrounding the black family. Though the groundwork for the expansion of the nation's war on crime was set in the 1960s and 1970s, the Reagan administration marks the fulfillment of decades long attempts to crack down on crime. Ronald Reagan was able to escalate the initiatives that began with his predecessors, advocating for more punitive measures in the criminal justice system that directly led to the disproportionate increase of black men in a prison system that was growing exponentially.[21] Under Reagan federal law enforcement was more centralized, urban police forces expanded, and the number of court cases grew. His administration criminalized drug abuse, especially by African Americans, and increased penalties for possession of crack cocaine, while ignoring crystal meth, a drug known to be used by lower-class white Americans.[22] In addition to enacting policies that that launched the "War on Drugs", the Reagan administration had a staff dedicated to publicize the prevalence of crack in 1985. The result was increased media depictions of "black 'crack whores,' 'crack dealers,' and 'crack babies'", further deepening the publics association of crack with lower

[19]See: Drew Humphries, *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs, and the Media* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1999).

[20]Deborah E. Ward, *The White Welfare Stare: The Racialization of U.S. Welfare Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 9.

[21]Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

[22]*Ibid.*, 309.

income inner city black residents.[23] Pivotal court cases, like the 1987 *McCleskey v. Kemp* ruling, made it even more difficult for racial bias to be challenged in the justice system, even though the inherent racism was clear.[24] Despite the prevalence of racial stereotypes that demonized the poor and a racially biased legal system that disproportionately affected black Americans and imprisoned black men at alarming rates, public discourse still suggested that the problems in black communities were a product of unstable black families.

Considering the correlation being drawn between moral behavior, economic stability, and two-parent households, marriage amongst black couples received increased attention. It was said to be the solution to the problems that ailed the black community, but it had long been seen as a key to legitimate African American citizenship. Dating back to the turn of the century, the Great Migration, and the New Negro, the private lives and successful relationships of African Americans had long been seen as confirmation of their morality. For many educated blacks, heteronormative patriarchal family structures were crucial to projecting an image of respectability, and a failure to adhere to these norms would have suggested immorality.[25] Black marriages were under increased pressure because of the expectation that they were to live up to standards of respectability in order to legitimate their claim to citizenship. However, for many African Americans, black marriages were of value for reasons related to their own self-preservation. For one, many African American women relied on their marriages to grant them legitimacy when engaging in race work.[26] Their marital status often made them more credible as

[23]Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 150.

[24]*Ibid.*, 310.

[25]Kevin Kelly Gaines, *Uplifting the Race : Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 42.

[26]Curwood, *Stormy Weather*, 22.

activists and contributed to the success of their agendas for the progress of African Americans.[27] This continued throughout the twentieth century. Rosa Park's marriage was a significant contributing factor in creating her respectable image when the NAACP decided to back her while she battled a conviction for refusing to move from a section of public transportation reserved for whites. Women like Claudette Colvin and Marie Louise Smith had encountered similar charges before Parks', however, their family circumstances exposed them to different kinds of criticism because they were seen as less "respectable" symbols of the movement. Once it was discovered that Colvin was pregnant with an illegitimate child, her case lost traction. So too did Smith's when activists decided that her low-income background and alcoholic father would create an image of her that would not result in a successful movement.[28]

Even though the challenges of racism and oppression often penetrated the inner lives of black Americans, "black love" and black marriage still provided a sanctuary for African Americans facing the hardships of a racist nation. Dating back to slavery, African Americans romantic relationships have been constructed as a form of resistance directly in opposition to a nation that has consistently sought to wear them down. Romantic relationships significantly affected how men and women related to the public and are "linked to citizenship and civil rights."[29] Love, especially romantic love, served as a reprieve from these troubles. Therefore, black marriages and romantic relationships provided much-needed support that allowed blacks to persevere, even in the worst of times.

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[27]*Ibid.*, 23.

[28]For more on the case of Rosa Parks and respectability see: Danielle L. McGuire *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance : A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

[29]Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock*, 27.

The ability of marriage to serve as an outward projection of black respectability, a sanctuary for black couples, and the origin of the black family meant the decline of marriages between black men and black women was especially concerning. In the post-Jim Crow United States, new opportunities for women and dwindling opportunities for men created tensions in romantic relationships. More black women than ever before were gaining advanced degrees and becoming college educated, allowing access to more lucrative careers.[30] Though black women have always worked more than their white counterparts, the 1980s saw the emergence of professional careers apart from the domestic work that many black women had historically taken part in. For black men circumstances were not the same.[31] In postwar America, many black men were able to find employment in production industries. In the mid-1970s, however, deindustrialization removed many of these jobs from the market. In the Great Lakes region, more than 50% of workers in the steel and auto industries lost their jobs as a result of the changing economy.[32] Lower education rates among black men meant many entering the workforce were looking for "unskilled" labor, which by the 1980s was quickly disappearing. Lower employment and education rates among black men rendered them “ineligible,” furthering the increase in unmarried black women. As William Julius Wilson demonstrates in multiple case studies, joblessness, and not the breakdown of the black family or romantic relationships, can be identified as the root cause of many of the problems that prevailed in urban black communities.[33]

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[30]In 1977 black men were obtaining degrees at a higher rate than black women, but by 1987 black women had taken the lead. See: Elaine B. Pinderhughes, “African American Marriage in the 20th Century” *Family Process* 41:2 (June 2002) pg, 269-282: 274.

[31]Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow : Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010)

[32]Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* 210.

[33]William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

Ebony, Black Respectability, and Success

Changes in the dating relationships between black men and black women were a topic of concern for African Americans across the nation, but when it came to issues of family life they were virtually absent from white mainstream publications.[34] Recognizing this in 1945, John Johnson and his team of editors founded *Ebony* to provide black Americans with stories of black success that they could relate to. In 1974, largely due to the success of *Ebony, Black Enterprise* magazine deemed the Johnson Publishing Family as the number one black business in the city of Chicago and the number two black-owned business in the country.[35] By the 50th anniversary in 1992, the magazine self-reported that readership had grown to more than 9 million per issue, and its circulation was approaching one million.[36] With a U.S. black population of about 24 million in 1980 and 30 million in 1990, the magazine reached roughly a third of the entire African American population.

Ebony's popularity and position in the market at the time meant it was the leading publication for stories about the black family, relationships, and the changes that were creating the "crisis of the black family." From its inception, *Ebony* wanted to present stories of black success, stories to make African Americans proud of who they were, but also to allow them to see the potential of who they could become. While many other black publications at the time of its inception were focused on civil rights issues, *Ebony* differed from the pack as it sought to give

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[34]One popular Newsweek Cover Story called "The marriage Crunch" falsely reported the statistic that women were more likely to get killed by a terrorist than get married after 30. The story drew from studies that only looked at educated white women, thus black women were not represented at all in their data.

[35]Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender : How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America : From the Age of the Pullman Porters to the Age of Obama*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016) 469.

[36]These numbers suggest for every issue sold, around 9 people read each issue.

its readers more positive content.[37] Writers like Lerone Bennett often wrote pieces on African American history to inspire pride in their readership, a model popularized in the early twentieth century by Carter G Woodson.[38] *Ebony* presented images that their readers could aspire to, even when it came to issues of dating and relationships. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, *Ebony* showed a renewed commitment to ideas of preserving the black family by strengthening romantic relationships and marriages amongst its readers. Not only was there an increase in articles and features directly advising readers how to navigate dating relationships and marriages, but it is also within this decade that *Ebony* began to publish annual black love issues, and a monthly advice column, *The Ebony Advisor*. The column showcased a renewed dedication to solving the issues of the black family and troubled gender relations between black men and women.

Based on goals articulated by founder John Johnson both in the magazine and in his autobiography, *Ebony* can be considered a publication dedicated to racial uplift. As historian Kevin Gaines explains, the term "uplift" has a complex meaning within the African American community, but in regard to *Ebon*y magazine the most fitting definition is "the struggle for a positive black identity in a deeply racist society."[39] The responsibility of promoting racial uplift has long been assumed by black elites, thus is it not surprising that a magazine owned and run by a black elite would contain aspects of this ideology. Ideas of racial uplift have long suggested that the advancement of the race was a moral struggle. The ideals and values of the middle class

[37]Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 76.

[38]Burnis R. Morris. *Carter G. Woodson: History, the Black Press, and Public Relations* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017). https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed March 28, 2019).

[39]Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 38.

were cast as the benchmark of morality. Thus, they took on the responsibility of "racial uplift", because they felt "moral criteria explained the difference between success and failure."[40] A projection of these ideals was seen as a requirement to ensure the advancement of the race as a whole. As a magazine run by and largely representative of the black middle class, the publication constantly reinforces different ideas of black respectability through its content. Representations of black success were not limited to academic or professional accomplishments, but also included heteronormative values in love and marriage.

The published content was clearly in line with the company's mission. Stories that affirm black success were a staple, with most covers featuring black celebrities. Actors, musicians, athletes, politicians, and others were positioned as role models for the black community because of their achievements in their respective fields. As the magazine grew in popularity and had a larger impact on national advertising, Johnson was able to negotiate *Ebony's* value and fight for campaigns that better represented its readers. As early as the 1950s, the magazine made it clear that *Ebony's* readers had a powerful impact on the consumer market, and therefore were a target demographic for goods and services if they were marketed towards blacks specifically. Glossy full color advertisements of blacks on vacation in tropical locations, drinking premium liquor, and indulging in luxury products were a testament to black economic success. Even controversial or seemingly negative topics, such as the tensions that existed between black men and women, received a positive spin as the editors repeatedly articulated that they were uniquely positioned to highlight potential avenues for improvement. The content did the work of explicitly outlining for readers the importance of black love, and why issues that threatened black relationships were a problem for the larger black community.

[40]*Ibid.*, 169.

Not only did *Ebony* publish stories about successful black Americans, but they often called on the expertise of prominent "experts" to help guide its readers to success. *Ebony* constantly called on the same pool of dedicated sociologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and researchers to comment for articles about dating, relationships, and the black family. Often their own books and research were quoted and referenced within articles making their presence in the magazine a mutually beneficial relationship. The experts received publicity and were marketed to the masses while also contributing to *Ebony's* reputation as a legitimate and credible source. On many occasions, these researchers penned their own articles for the magazine, and in these instances their credentials were clearly noted in the byline. The bold byline stating their credentials and institutional affiliation drew a clear distinction between pieces written by *Ebony's* team of journalists and the experts affiliated with the magazine. Pictures of experts, all of whom were black, often appeared alongside their comments and critiques, allowing readers to associate them with stories of black success. By obtaining advanced degrees and prestigious positions at various universities, these very experts were visual representations of black success.

EBONY ADVISES "HOW TO DATE"

Picking up on the demand for content that addressed the shifts in dating and changes in relationships between black men and women, *Ebony* increasingly published articles that advised its readers on "how to date." This content serves the dual purpose of providing a range of solutions to the problems that have appeared in post- Jim Crow America, while also instructing readers on how they could become the ideal potential partner.

Many of the changes occurring in the dating landscape were attributed to the successes of the sexual revolution and how it provided women with more opportunities for their personal and professional lives. One September 1988 cover story asks, "What Do Black Women Really Want in a Man?" When setting the stage to outline the expectations of women, the author, Lynn Norment, writes, "During the past decade woman have been glorified, criticized, and analyzed. Repeatedly they have been told that the sexual revolution has set them free, that now they can go out into the market place and, armed with a solid education and plenty of ambition, get a good job and do just as well as their male counterparts." This notion, as Norment argues, makes way for the "superwoman," the woman who can have it all: a great job, a great marriage, and a beautiful family.[41] She then goes on to say, however, that many black women will be disappointed because "due to the great shortage of comparable single men," they may remain unmarried. As a common writer on the topic of relationships, Norment repeatedly referenced this

[41]Lynn Norment, "What Do Black Women Really Want in a Man," *Ebony*, September, 1988, 59.

shortage and often wrote articles that sought to aid female readers who were still looking for their special someone despite the numbers.[42]

As the magazine mentioned in its special issue, *Ebony* focused not only on these problems but also the potential for improvement. For every challenge that faced the black family and dating relationships, there was always a proposed solution. When it came to the male shortage, there were many attempts to convince their female readership that there was still hope. The article "Where are All the Eligible Black Men", sought to do just this. The piece begins with the unlikely anecdote of an unnamed woman who decided to take an impromptu vacation to Alaska. While the goal of the trip was not to go looking for love, *Ebony* tells the story of how she met her husband, an oil engineer, while she was away. The two married just a few months after meeting. The article then retells the story of another woman who unexpectedly met her future spouse on a trip to visit her aunt in Columbus, Ohio. If two examples were not enough, this story was followed by yet a third young woman who met her husband in Olive Branch, Mississippi. In the words of the author, the message was clear: "If good single black men can be found in these places, then surely there are others."[43]

The article was a direct response to claims that eligible black men were hard to find. Even though the author confirmed these sentiments when stating that black women outnumbered black men by about one million, the tone of the article minimized the impact of the shortage. *Ebony* relied on the testimonials of 8 women from Oakland to Atlanta singing the praises of the

[42]The male shortage was not merely an illusion of *Ebony* editors. In 1985, there were 73 men to every 100 black women in the population, however, only 43 marriageable men to 100 black women. For white Americans, the proportion was 93 men to every 100 white women and 63 marriageable white men to every 100 white women. The reasons for this disparity were "higher death rates from disease, poor healthcare, and violent crime eliminate large numbers of them from the marriage pool; high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, and incarceration further reduce the number of desirable males available for marriage." Elaine B. Pinderhughes, "African American Marriage in the 20th Century," *Family Process* 41:2 (June 2002) pg 269-282.

[43]"Where Are the Eligible Black Men," *Ebony*, September, 1980.

men in their towns to suggest that the actual issue was not a true shortage, but instead readers simply were not looking in the right places. The various anecdotes and first-hand accounts focus on steps readers could take, rather than addressing the root of the shortage and attempting to solve the underlying problems. Evidence suggested that this shortage was due to a stark increase in incarceration rates, higher homicide rates for black men, and lower life expectancies, but ignoring these larger issues allowed *Ebony*'s readers to suggest that many women were simply not looking hard enough.

Despite giving a roadmap of sorts to where pockets of "eligible" black men resided, reports of the male shortage and solutions for how to combat it continued to appear throughout the decade. By 1986, *Ebony* published yet another article: "How Black Women Can Deal with The Shortage of Black Men." While the previous article relied on women's own stories, *Ebony* turned to social scientists to give their solutions to the shortage. Dr. Nathan Hare, a San Francisco sociologist and psychologist, and his wife, Julia Hare, both provided their expert opinions to help black women find "the man that will rescue them from their singlehood."[44] One suggestion was for readers to engage polyamorous relationships. Though not necessarily encouraged, the Hare's pointed out that the reality was that in many cases women, knowingly and unknowingly, shared a partner. The authors also presented the possibility of dating outside of one's race. At the time, the topic was still contentious, but sex therapist Joanne Tyson suggested that interracial dating may have had the potential to bring about "the mixing of the races that we supposedly have been trying to achieve for so long."[45]

[44]"How Black Women Can Deal With The Shortage of Black Men," *Ebony,* May 1986, 29.

[45]*Ibid.,* 32

Not ones to shy away from difficult subjects, *Ebony's* writers were also tasked with finding ways to address the societal changes during the preceding 25 years that allowed black women to gain access to more lucrative career options. These women in the 1980s suddenly had the option to seriously pursue their careers and delay marriage and starting a family. Despite obviously being career women themselves, Dr. Hare and Dr. Ann Poussaint advised against waiting to find a partner and urged women to date in college and their early twenties. The authors also stated that some women "aren't shy about their professional and financial successes, giving men the impression that they either don't need or have time for a meaningful relationship", a message that discouraged potential suitors.[46] Poussaint and Hare's findings are on par with other researchers in their fields at the time. In a different piece, Dr. Nathan Hare points out how women's increased participation in the workforce was affecting men who were experiencing reduced relative employment.[47] In many ways, *Ebony's* writers were on to something. Researchers have long acknowledged the effect that women's participation in the workplace had on the longevity of their romantic relationships.[48] *Ebony* exports, however, believed there was an urgent need to address these differences within black couples because they posed a severe threat to the love that had already been constructed as the backbone of the community.

The solutions offered by *Ebony's* journalists and the professionals that they quoted often suggested that these problems could be solved by a shift in the reader's own actions, rather than

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[46]*Ibid.*

[47]Charles Whitaker, "What Do Black Men Really Want from Black Women," *Ebony*, December, 1988, 100.

[48]For a more in depth look at the statistical data see: Patricia Dixon. "Marriage Among African Americans: What Does the Research Reveal?" *Journal of African American Studies* 13. 1 (2009): 29-46. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819190.

critiquing the root cause of these issues. Though a shortage of marriageable black men was directly linked to many factors including the increase of the black male prison population, decrease in employment options, and widening gaps in educational attainment, the solution was not to draw attention to these problems but to simply suggest women look harder. Instead of highlighting the institutional barriers that led to the drastic difference in educational attainment between men and women, experts like the Hares encouraged women to refine their standards. A potential partner's income, job, profession, or educational background were "superficial" traits deemed less important than sensitivity or a willingness to contribute to stereotypically "wifely" duties. Advice of this nature directly instructed readers on what traits were most important when in search of a partner, especially when the goal was a lasting relationship.

In December 1988, another cover story focused on what single black men desired in perspective romantic partners. Like Lynn Norment, when exploring this topic journalist Charles Whitaker also relied on the work of psychologists to get to the root of what exactly was holding singles back. Dr. Nathan Hare was quoted, once again, stating, "the trauma occurring in contemporary relationships between Black males and females is a result of the rising economic and professional status of Black women and the stagnant and declining economic and professional status of Black men."[49] As he continued, however, he cited yet another point of potential conflict. Hare argued that while many men said they wanted a career-minded mate, these declarations were the result of societal pressures. They really were in pursuit of women who were willing to embrace traditional gender roles, but were afraid to openly admit it. Whitaker quoted men in disagreement with Hare's position, but the issue was never fully settled.

[49]Whitaker, "What Do Black Men Really Want," 101.

Regardless, Hare's point that not all wanted an educated partner is still important, for it foreshadowed some of the issues *Ebony* sought to remedy in later conversations about marriage.

On more than one occasion, *Ebony* profiled men with working class jobs, often to highlight their "eligibility." From the men's perspective, the women they wished to pursue were looking for the stereotypical doctor or lawyer. In a story questioning black women's preferences for mates and whether or not their standards were set too high, Chris Benson profiled T.C., a bus company supervisor in Atlanta, who, despite his modest earnings, was described as exceptionally handsome, intelligent, hardworking, and sensitive.[50] Benson explained that T.C. and men in similar blue-collar professions were becoming more critical of women who were only interested in mates that could aid them in their mission for upward socioeconomic mobility. As the article continued, it reads as a critique of women who prioritized the status of a potential partner over character traits. The author spent much of his time attempting to convince his audience, especially female readers, that differences in profession and class standing can be minimized through communication and understanding. Benson insisted "dialogue is the critical ingredient in erasing differences and strengthening the Black family – the most important institution of Black America."[51] For him, though, this obstacle was increasingly present in many dating relationships, and it was necessary that couples found a way to overcome it if the black family was to thrive. Ideas of racial uplift are clear, as readers were being instructed that the way they conduct their own personal romantic relationships had a significant impact on the survival of the race.

Unlike women, men were not directly criticized for their standards, but they were not completely let off the hook either. *Ebony's* advisors were clear that despite finding a partner,

[50]Chris Benson, "Do Black Women Set Their Standards Too High for Marriage,*" Ebony,* January 1981, 96-102.

[51]*Ibid,*. 97.

some married women seemed to be "equally unhappy" as those who were still single. Norment includes the perspectives of researcher Shere Hite and psychologist Dr. Anne Ashmore Poussaint. Both scholars note that one of the major shifts in dating culture in the wake of the sexual revolution was women's increased desire for a partner willing to share the emotional burdens of the relationship. Hite's work argues that women of the 1980s, unlike their parents' generation, were no longer satisfied in relationships where they were the only one tasked with "paying attention to the quality of the relationship, bringing up difficult issues, and resolving conflicts constructively."[52]As women were more able to provide for themselves financially, their priorities on the dating scene reflected a desire for a man willing to be an emotional contributor to the relationship rather than just a financial provider. Articles such as this and many others encouraged men to be softer in their relationships. *Ebony* directly attempted to dispel stereotypes that discouraged men from being loving, affectionate, and taking on "wifely" duties in the home.

Benson's attempt to shift ideas about what was important in a partner was rather explicit, but other editorials were more subdued when suggesting what constituted an ideal partner. For example, in 1988, writers used the personal testimonies of the men in the annual bachelors feature to indirectly advise women about the kind of traits they should adopt when looking to attract a partner.[53] These men were said to want women who were "financially secure and spiritually grounded" as well as "in good physical and intellectual condition, as familiar with a slam dunk as with a spatula."[54] Rather than directly instructing female readers that they must embody these particular characteristics, they made it clear that this profile was what the ideal

[52]Norment, "What Do Black Women Really Want," 60.

[53]"Bachelors for 1988," *Ebony,* June 1988, 46.

[54]*Ibid.,* 42.

bachelor would want. Thus, the underlying message was that in order to find any luck with a man like the ones featured, women should be ambitious and career minded, but not so much so that it detracted from their ability to be present in the home.

The cover story featured 28 men of varying ages and began by mentioning that their salaries ranged from $24,000 to $400,000 plus, appealing to women who preferred financially successful men. The median household income at the time hovered around $30,000 for the nation as a whole,[55] but for blacks families it was about $22,000.[56] While all of the men featured were squarely in the middle class based on their own income, the magazine flattens their distinctions, attributing characteristics of the upper class to them all, stating, "many are as comfortable with preparing a gourmet meal as with…discussing politics or the stock market."[57] This attempt to attribute personality traits to all of the men featured, despite their income, can be read as another attempt by the editors to convince women that salary and profession were not the end all be all. It was their way to reaffirm that even men in less lucrative careers have the traits that they deem to be most important in finding a mate.

In comparison, the introduction of the bachelorette feature appearing the following month profiled bachelorettes who met all of the bachelors' desired qualities, but also clarified what men should embody to attract their ideal woman. Despite the various articles published in the magazine pointing out the higher likelihood of women to gain advanced degrees and higher-paying jobs, the income of the women featured ranged from $15,000 to $97,000. Again, this

[55]"United States Median Household Income: 1950-1990" https://web.stanford.edu/class/polisci120a/immigration/Median%20Household%20Income.pdf

[56]Claudette E. Bennett, Barbara M. Martin Kymberly DeBarros, *We The Americans: Blacks*. US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration Bureau of Census September 1993 https://www.census.gov/prod/cen1990/wepeople/we-1.pdf

[57]"Bachelors for 1988,"46.

compensation spectrum was solidly middle class, but significantly less than the range of salaries of the bachelors featured. While the article ran the month before highlighted hobbies such as horseback riding, sailing, basketball, and bodybuilding, the introduction to the year's bachelorettes highlighted their community service work at churches and civil rights organizations, hobbies that suggested domesticity and respectability. Unlike the men profiled, the introduction to the bachelorettes focused on sentimental qualities. These women are reportedly in pursuit of men who are affectionate, intelligent, respectful, sincere, and looking for a commitment.[58] Each of the 18 women were given their own short profile including what they specifically were looking for in a mate, and only one mentioned financial stability. The most commonly desired trait, according to these short bios, was intelligence.

These profiles, published on an annual basis throughout the decade, confirmed the many anecdotes and expert opinions that insisted that despite the male shortage and difficulty of some men to accept a career-minded partner, there were still eligible men across the country. One edition of this feature begins, "Women who complain that a good 'eligible' man is hard to find will be impressed with this year's crop of *EBONY* bachelors."[59] Ironically enough, the first bachelor on the list was NBA basketball player Michael Jordan, hardly the average man and certainly not the most accessible. Even when the options presented were unrealistic for many, *Ebony* worked hard to create the illusion of a perfect partner for both men and women. The underlying implication was that in order to secure a lifelong partner like those who were featured, you must embody the so-called "desired" qualities. Women who hoped to marry a "bachelor" must be career oriented, financially secure, attractive, and share their interests. Men,

[58]"Bachelorettes for 1988," *Ebony*, July 1988, 44.

[59]"Bachelors for 1986," *Ebony*, June 1986, 117.

on the other hand, must be intelligent, sincere, and willing to commit. Because numerous articles were clear to point out the increase of black men working blue collar jobs, it is interesting to note that financial stability was not highlighted as one of the desired qualities. These articles, and many others, were explicitly telling black men and women how they could obtain a happy, healthy, and longstanding relationship. Not only was there advice on how to *attract* the perfect mate, but these articles could also be read as advice on how to *be* the perfect mate.

Advice on relationships and dating was present in many issues published throughout the decade, but there were many topics that remained untouched. When talking about dating, *Ebony* exclusively focused on heteronormative values, completely ignoring same-sex couples and those who did not identify with the gender binary. Early in the decade, *Ebony*, in typical fashion, called on yet another expert to answer the question, "Is homosexuality a threat to the black family?" Dr. June Dobbs Butts, assistant professor of Psychiatry at the Howard University School of Medicine, penned an article in which she presented the findings from her own research and that of other social scientists. At the end of the article, Butts writes, "It is my opinion that homosexuality is not a threat to either the stability or the future of the black family."[60] Despite the conclusion being characterized as the opinion of Dr. Butts, it was clear that the article was written to combat the stigma of same-sex relationships. Butts' position as an independent author and her ownership of her own conclusions provided the magazine with some distance from her stance, but the mere fact that it was published suggests *Ebony's* willingness to push back against this stigma as well. Despite this apparent challenging of the heteronormative status quo, *Ebony* never addressed the issues of non-heterosexual couples, nor did it include them in the numerous profiles of couples in the magazine.

[60]June Dobbs Butts, "Is Homosexuality A Threat to The Black Family," *Ebony,* April 1981, 143.

The publication also geared its advice towards couples where both partners were African Americans. While it does tangentially mention interracial dating, and in one instance even suggested it may be the solution to the black-male shortage, authors do not directly advise readers on how to navigate these relationships. In the broader context of the discussion of the black family *Ebony* discussed children of interracial couples, but even those features provided little "advice" about how the parents can navigate this dynamic as a couple. Writers were often silent on the cultural differences that might arise. While it was clear that the main focus was heterosexual couples of the same race, a 1982 article titled "What Kind of Spouses Do Africans Make" indicated that *Ebony's* relationship experts were acknowledging that different issues might arise for those dating non-American blacks.[61] The article concluded that for many African Americans, African immigrants did make good partners but not without first highlighting common differences of opinion regarding gender roles within the home and family structure. An exploration of the articles of the decade made it evident that *Ebony's* primary focus was advising heterosexual couples where both partners were African Americans. Though other couples might be mentioned, they were never being advised on how to meet a partner and preserve a relationship after courting.

Since heterosexual values and social respectability were centered in the publication, this left little room for those who were uninterested in dating casually without the intention of getting married. The dating advice given was written with the clear intent of creating long lasting unions, rather than just casual encounters. Articles like the annual features of bachelors and bachelorettes made direct references to the familial goals and aspirations of those features. Articles such as "How to Marry a Successful Man" were clear in their intent. Throughout the

[61]Lynn Norment, "What Kind of Spouses Do Africans Make," *Ebony*, February 1982, 100.

decade the few articles that did profile happily single people primarily focused on career driven women who worked long hours and had demanding careers. Many did not believe that they had the time for serious committed relationships but were sure to note that they still had fulfilling dating lives. Some women profiled even had long term relationships, but were uninterested in marriage, while others had active dating lives. The magazine completely ignored women who avoided dating altogether because it was an unappealing option. Excluding family structures that did not conform to patriarchal norms from the magazine was necessary to maintain the periodical's commitment to images of black middle-class respectability.[62]

[62]Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 43.

EBONY AND SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGES

In the twentieth century, the idea of romantic love between black couples grew to be greatly cherished by readers of *Ebony*. Considering the country's history with slavery, black Americans did not take lightly the ability to choose their own partners and engage in lasting, loving relationships.[63] For many, intimacy between black men and women was treated as a barometer for the health and success of blacks throughout the country. At the turn of the twentieth century, many African Americans believed that their private lives, if they met a certain standard, had the ability to change the way they were perceived by the white public. Specifically, moral marriages and "healthy" families would work to advance the race.[64] Not only would they serve this function by simply existing, but dating back to the nineteenth century, marriage often gave women a springboard to engage in "race work," initiatives that we would now refer to as activism. From Booker T. and Margaret Washington to Rosa Parks, women's marital status legitimated their work in initiatives meant to advance the status of African Americans. Black couples were not only living for themselves, but their unions transformed to become about more than just love. For *Ebony*, they were the foundation on which Black America was built.

In the 1980s, *Ebony* repeatedly emphasized that black love and strong black families were the foundation for the survival of African Americans. As a publication that subscribed to ideas of middle-class respectability that centered patriarchal family structures as a marker of

[63]David Silkenat, *Moments of Despair: Suicide, Divorce, & Debt in Civil War Era North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011)

[64]Curwood, *Stormy Weather,* 40.

morality, the ideal family was one founded on a strong Christian marriage. The content published in *Ebony* related to black marriages defined what "successful" marriages looked like by profiling both celebrity couples and everyday couples in long-lasting unions. The features on married couples not only gave visual representations of successful marriages, but the couples often used these opportunities to give readers advice and reveal the "secrets" to making their relationships work. In a short essay entitled "Black Love," black love is described as "filling us, restoring us, giving us refuge from the rage, the racism, the rancor of the world that threatens daily to blind us and pull us apart."[65] *Ebony* felt Black History Month was a fitting time to remind readers that "we, more than any other people, are lovers and survivors." This essay summarized many of the sentiments that appeared in *Ebony* throughout the decade.

Images of black love were a staple in the publication, especially the yearly Black Love Issue. The 1988 edition featured "The Day They Said 'I Do'" with "treasured photos" from the weddings of "notable" African Americans.[66] The weddings of Hank Aaron, Mayor and Mrs. Andrew Young, Marlon and Carol Jackson, and Walter Payton are all highlighted. Printed right under the title was Ephesians 5:31: "And the two shall become one." The couples selected for the article that followed were highlighted because they "keep it flowing."[67]

The emphasis that *Ebony* placed on marriage is not a surprise, as black couples have long been expected to use their relationships for the advancement of the race. Dating back to the interwar period, "immoral" interpersonal relationships were thought to be the root of many problems in black communities. For the past 200 years, almost every decade has produced a new

[65]"Black Love," *Ebony,* February 1988, 141.

[66]"The Day They Said I Do" *Ebony,* February 1988, 142.

[67]"Black Love," *Ebony,* February 1988, 141.

discourse about the “crisis” of the black family. The critiques of the 1960s, notably the response to the Moynihan Report, argued that the breakdown of black families could be attributed to matriarchal family structures and unwed mothers.

The goal of the publication in the 1980s was to give its readers an ideal to aspire to, but often offered advice for what readers could do at all stages of their marriage to have a successful union. The June 1987 issue featured "Newlyweds: 10 Steps to Make Marriage Last.” The list was geared towards those in their first years of marriage and included tips on how to manage finances, how to communicate effectively, and what to expect from your spouse after saying "I do.” Like the columns on dating, articles such as this one acknowledged the changing dynamics of marital relationships and instructed readers on how to respond. Point 7, for example, discussed dealing with work-related stress. Norment writes, "In today's progressive society, it is more common to find two-career marriages than traditional ones in which the wife stays home and cares for the house and children."[68] The shifts that were often outlined when the conversation was focused on dating and finding the perfect mate often reappeared in articles about couples who were already married. It suggested that a successful marriage required a more equal distribution of work that had traditionally been gendered work for women. Husbands were encouraged to take on more “wifely” duties, such as cleaning around the home, cooking meals, and caring for their children.

This article is also an example of *Ebony's* use of "experts" in the field to legitimate its claims and advice, positioning the publication as an authority on these issues. The first point of the article focused on communicating effectively in a marriage and directly quoted Linda Upperman-Ross, a licensed clinical social worker. Upperman-Ross is quoted yet again further

[68]Lynn Norment, “Newlyweds:10 Steps to Make Marriage Last,” *Ebony,* June 1987, 148.

down in the article, as was Howard University sociologist Joyce Ladner. Both women offer advice to couples based on their own experience, but Ladner went as far to suggest therapy might be helpful for some couples.

When it came to marriage advice, the magazine did not solely rely on the advice of licensed professionals, but also the experiences of a wide range of married couples. The cover of the August 1981 issue features Jermaine and Hazel Jackson. The featured article candidly detailed the trouble the couple faced when Jermaine's father pulled the singing group he belonged to, the Jackson Five, from Motown, the recording company owned by his father-in-law Berry Gordy. Jermaine was the sole member of the group who decided to stay, choosing to begin a solo career rather than depart with the rest of his family. As can be imagined, this caused a lot of tension within the family, and speculation from the press. Ultimately, Hazel and Jermaine insisted that what got them through such a turbulent time in their marriage was their commitment to each other and their faith in "strong Black family love." When discussing how they were able to overcome the difficult decision that threatened their marriage, Hazel remarked, "that's what has brought the black family through the worst times in our history as a people," drawing a clear connection between their own personal battles and the power that black love had within the broader black community. The couple also recalled how keeping each other first above all else helped them to survive the drama of the split, which occurred five years before the publication of the article. As a young couple when they married (Jermaine was 29 when they married, Hazel was 19) and still a young couple when the article was published in their seventh year of marriage, the Jacksons provided a model for how to deal with conflict. Despite both having lived their entire lives growing up in the entertainment industry and constantly having to deal with being among the most famous black Americans at the time, *Ebony's* decision to focus on a

conflict that transpired five years prior to publication is quite telling of the message it hoped to send to young couples. Belief in black love and putting your partner first were cornerstones of a successful marriage.

A common occurrence is an attempt by *Ebony* not only to highlight issues but to provide real and tangible solutions for its readers. Constantly *Ebony* instructed its female audience to reexamine their outlook when it came to marriage. The male shortage and disproportionate education rates simply meant that many black women were going to have to reevaluate their expectations of finding a partner with a salary just as high as theirs or higher. The magazine interviewed couples whose "love and common interests overshadow salary, status, and educational differences," proving that though it may seem a bit unconventional, it was in fact possible to find love outside of one's class status.[69] Laura Randolph interviewed women whose marriages had lasted as long as 27 years, along with those who were newly engaged, to understand how they were able to overcome what, for some, was a significant hurdle. According to Laura Randolph, "these relationships are exploding all across the country."[70] When asked how they made their marriages work despite their different careers, all of the women interviewed emphasized that it was not the job that made the man, but rather who he was as a person. In the case of Sandra Herriott, her partner Roy, a baker, stood out in comparison to all the "white collar" men she had dated previously. She commented that they had a much higher quality relationship not only because of the "emotional nourishment" he provided, but also because he saw her for who she was and not what she did.[71] This article confirmed the expert advice that

[69]Laura Randolph, "White Collar, Blue Collar Love," *Ebony,* May 1989, 48.

[70]*Ibid.*, 50.

[71]*Ibid.* 52.

appeared in previous columns. These women were positioned as proof that emotional fulfillment was more important than financial wealth.

From Chicago to Virginia, long-lasting and happy marriages were still thriving despite largely different salaries because they were built on more than just superficial characteristics. The happiness in these relationships stemmed from their emotional connection, shared values, and the way they cared about each other. While the article started with the stories of two women who were hesitant to move forward with the men they were dating because they were embarrassed by their professions, the six couples proved that many high-earning women were happy with their choices to marry men who made less money. The broader statement being made was not just about differences in careers but also about what was important in a partnership.

There were also various instances where couples who had been together for decades revealed the "secrets" to their love. Earl Caldwell contributed to this trend not by writing about his own marriage, but by highlighting the 72-year union of his parents, George and Pearl Caldwell. Throughout his retelling of their story, he detailed how they met and how they raised a family despite multiple moves around the country and professional changes. The six-page spread included pictures of the couple tending to their home, entertaining guests around the kitchen table, and talking with neighbors. Earl's description of his parents' relationship and the accompanying photos allows for the reader to imagine the couple and their love not only as the backbone for their entire family, but pillars in the community as well. The couple's story was meant to be an example of what black love really looked like, and its potential to inspire others as well. Black love is what created and maintains black families, and black families were what kept the black community going.

Ebony's emphasis on marriages illuminated the tone and urgency of many of the articles about dating and courting that often appeared alongside them. If dating was the precursor to a long-lasting marital relationship, then the so-called shortage of African American men, tensions that arose around women's superior educations, and the lack of emotional male partners posed a "crisis" not just for those looking to date, but for black Americans as a whole. As John Johnson states, "we – Black women, Black men, and Black children – rise and fall together."[72] A decrease in black marriages and turmoil within romantic relationships would rock the foundation on which Black America stood. Therefore, it was important for *Ebony* to not only advise their readers, but to provide tangible examples of marital success to validate the advice. The stories of celebrity couples and average couples were meant to show that successful marriages were rooted in strong faith, a belief in black love, and an emphasis on the emotional connection between partners.

[72]John Johnson, "Publishers Statement," *Ebony,* August 1986, 30.

EBONY, ROMANCE, AND THE BLACK CONSUMER

Ebony's success with advertisers and its ability to provide an unrivaled and unprecedented access to black consumers offers a rich source base to analyze the ways black relationships were portrayed in adverts. Depictions of middle-class, heteronormative, black nuclear families were not limited to the columns and articles about dating and marriage. The magazine's advertisements were perhaps the most prominent visual representations of what *Ebony* was encouraging its readers to aspire to.

The Johnson Publishing Company had long realized the value of advertising for their publication. In fact, its pursuit of large advertising accounts began long before the 1980s. In 1954, the company created and distributed a film titled *The Secret of Selling the Negro.* The intent of the production was to dispel many of the myths that large corporations may have had about the spending habits and buying power of African Americans. According to their production, the "negro market" was a 15-billion-dollar market that had yet to be tapped. Producers relied on census data, statistics produced by government agencies, and even an appearance by the United States Secretary of Commerce, Sinclair Weeks. In his brief declaration, Weeks reassured agencies that the claims about the buying power of Black Americans were in fact true, and if taken into consideration could positively affect the entire US economy. The documentary also disclosed insights into *Ebony's* readership specifically. At the time of production, 54% of its readers owned a record player, 64% owned TV's, and 78% owned electric refrigerators. This information signaled to advertisers that *Ebony* was the publication that would

grant them access to the middle-class black consumer who had the money to spend on their products.

John Johnson's status as owner of not only *Ebony*, but also *Tan* and *Jet*, at a time when companies were recognizing the potential of the black consumer gave him a unique position as an authority on how to reach the black consumer. Because Johnson "invented the black consumer market," his advice on how to be successful within it was highly valued.[73] *The Secret of Selling the Negro* is representative of the many ways that *Ebony's* founder, John Johnson, sought to provide "strategies and techniques for successful marketing, market research and, perhaps most important, a responsible and successful Black medium to reach these consumers."[74] The film was just a small part of a larger advertising program put together by Johnson to aid merchandisers in large cities in their efforts to sell to black consumers. Johnson soon became successful in doing what few other publishers of African American publications were able to do; he ran a profitable magazine that was consistently able to draw revenue from advertisers.

Many of Johnson's ideas were not revolutionary as they often echoed the sentiments of other black marketing consultants in the 1940s and 1950s. However, his position, the impact of his publications, and his success in attracting mainstream retailers allowed him to play a unique role in affecting the broader change of advertisements for black markets that cannot be overlooked.[75] In *Ebony* specifically, there was a gradual change from generic, industry-standard, marketing campaigns to advertisements that featured black models and actors. For Johnson and

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[73]John H. Johnson and Lerone Bennett, *Succeeding against the Odds* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1989), 229.

[74]D. E. Brooks, (1991). *Consumer markets and consumer magazines: Black America and the culture of consumption, 1920-1960* (Order No. 9136901). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (303923129). Retrieved from http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/303923129?accountid=14244

[75]*Ibid.*, 72.

Ebony, it was not only important that merchandisers understood unique differences between black shoppers and other groups, but that the readers saw themselves in the ads as well. They were not just selling goods and services, but a lifestyle.

Ebony had gained a reputation for being able to successfully recruit merchandisers to advertise with them and by the 1980s was showing no signs of slowing down. Issues of the magazine ranged from 120 to 180 pages, with at least half of these pages featuring an advertisement of some kind. Cover to cover, the July 1984 issue of the magazine was 136 pages, with over 80 showcasing an advertisement. Whether a full two-page spread or a smaller column strategically placed alongside an article, many of these advertisements featured alcoholic beverages, hair products, and cigarettes. This issue was representative of many of the decade, and it was not uncommon for editions of *Ebony* to have around 75 pages of dedicated space for advertisements.

The advertisements and images present in *Ebony* were some of the most prominent displays of black love and romance in the magazine. Whether it was the ever-present cigarette ad that always lay just inside the cover, a haircare advertisement, or an ad for whiskey, *Ebony's* readers were constantly surrounded by depictions of middle-class couples and families. These advertisements were a targeted attempt by different advertising agencies to gain black consumers. Beginning in the 1960s, publications such as *Ebony* were adamant that their readership could not relate to content created for white audiences, and by the 1980s the publication featured advertisements portraying black life almost exclusively.[76] Not only were they selling goods, but they were also selling black, middle-class family life.

[76]Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

No matter the product being sold, a common occurrence in these advertisements were depictions of black couples and families that mirrored the advice on dating and marriage in the magazine's articles of the decade. Take, for instance, one Coca-Cola ad that appeared in the magazine's July 1980 issue. Featured on the last page of the publication, it depicts the scene of a couple at home. The woman pictured is wearing a ring on her ring finger, which suggests the couple is married. She is also wearing business attire, a trendy matching skirt set paired with a pink blazer. She looks at the meal with a luminous smile, her hands clasped together as if she is applauding in approval. The man in the advert has on a button-down shirt, slightly opened at the neck with a white apron. On the table is the meal he prepared, consisting of salad, greens, cornbread, a sort of casserole, and a main dish. He is looking at his wife lovingly and offers her a glass with ice and an ice-cold coke. The text on the advertisement reads, "When your man cooks up a delicious surprise…Have a Coke and a smile," with the tagline "Coke adds life" just below.

This advertisement is the perfect accompaniment to many of the advice columns and articles the magazine featured. For one, the wedding ring and phrase "your man" set the expectation that this is a married couple, or at the very least an engaged couple. It depicts a woman returning home from work, her modest yet formal attire suggesting she has a professional career. While the man's outfit is mostly obscured by the apron he is wearing, the button-down shirt and the mere fact that he is even wearing an apron suggests that professional dress lies underneath. This all hints that he, too, is a working professional who literally "rolled up his sleeves" to perform a nice gesture for his partner. Both the text and the woman's applause allow the viewer to interpret that this scenario is not a regular or expected occurrence. This advertisement is the perfect depiction of a bit of advice that appeared in an article that aimed to give suggestions to married couples seeking to reignite their love. The third suggestion for

husbands was "Treat your wife to one of your fantastic meals. She'd really appreciate coming home from work and relaxing while you put together the dinner."[77]

Reoccurring themes regarding shifting romantic relationships are present in this image. For one, despite the shortage of black men in America, the lucky lady pictured was not only able to find a partner, but also a long-term commitment. Secondly, the happy couple seems to be adjusting to a household with two working professionals. While the man in the picture only occasionally, at best, greets her with prepared meals as she returns home, they find a way to balance this responsibility. As readers are constantly being reminded, the new introduction of women into the professional workforce meant that men would occasionally have to step into nontraditional roles within the home. Thirdly, and for some readers perhaps most significant, is the suggestion that he is doting on her. The Coke and glass of ice are both poised in his hands, ready to be poured for her. The first course is already made, the table is set, and she will likely be tended to for the rest of the meal. As Norment writes in her article, husbands who pitch in like this are not only serving a practical purpose but are appealing to their wives' emotional needs as well.

The pages of *Ebony* also contain various advertisements that show black middle-class couples. Lyn and Tom Williams are pictured in their New York home, posing with their cat, both holding glasses of Puerto Rican rum on the rocks. According to the accompanying caption, Lynn is on the board of the Harlem School of the Arts, and Tom works in real estate. At the end of the day, "they relax together and enjoy smooth white rum on the rocks."[78] Both are dressed in relaxed but expensive looking clothing, smiling in front of their full wall of books and family

[77]"25 Ways to Put the Magic Back Into Your Marriage," *Ebony,* March 1981,112.

[78]"Rums of Puerto Rico Advertisement," *Ebony,* August 1984, 95.

photos. The advertisement sends a clear message. Both Williamses are successful and enjoy the finer things of life. Together, they elevate the brand.

The Coca-Cola and Pacific Rum ads were specifically about married couples, but various advertisements featured depictions of black family love as well. One particular ad was for a bright red Jeep Cherokee. The scene pictured is in the driveway of a beautifully landscaped, single-family home. Husband and wife stand off to the side, locked in an intimate embrace smiling at their son washing the family car. The tag line centered in bold text reads, "Jeep Cherokee. Off road, on road…it's a family affair."[79] The advertisement suggests that their happiness as a family stems from their middle-class lifestyle and material possession. It also, however, showcases an image of an upwardly mobile nuclear family lifestyle that readers can admire. As a magazine that is constantly looking for ways to promote black success, these advertisements can be read as images for readers to aspire to. These are the images that their relationships should mirror.

[79]"Jeep Cherokee Ad," *Ebony,* August 1988, 96.

MAINSTREAM RECEPTION OF *EBONY*

Over time, *Ebony* gained a reputation as a credible source for advice on romance and marriage. Readers trusted the magazine and its columnists so much that they began to write with their own questions, asking for advice when navigating their own relationships. The articles' advice was often praised in the "Letters to the Editor" section, which appeared in every issue. Though the feedback was selected by the magazine and shows potential biases based on what they chose to publish, it still demonstrates the ways that many people related to the content.

By the 1980s, *Ebony* had established itself as a leading authority on advice when it came to issues of the black family, marriage, and relationships. In January 1981, *Ebony* began publishing a regular feature that remained a mainstay of the magazine through the decade: the *Ebony* Advisor. As stated in its inaugural article, the column was "prompted by hundreds of letters from concerned readers about their problems" and created with the intent to help readers with well-researched advice. The magazine stated from the outset that "answers to all questions will be thoroughly researched and will be checked with competent psychiatrists, medical doctors, and others expert in counseling families and individuals."[80] In the first column, 7 of the 8 questions that the magazine's editors chose to answer all had to do with the topics of sex and relationships. Throughout the 1980s the answers given to these sorts of questions often mimicked the articles in the magazine that covered similar topics. It is likely that it is for this reason precisely that readers bothered to write in with their questions anyway. The mere act of writing a

[80]Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, 20.

letter to *Ebony* with the hope that their question would be chosen is a clear indication that many readers held the publication in high regard and saw it as a sort of authority on these issues. *Ebony's* charge that all questions would be well researched and answered by professionals could have only encouraged more questions of this kind. In the postwar period, the opinions of experts gained more influence in mainstream society, so for readers this was likely a welcome declaration.[81]

More explicit affirmation of the magazine and the content that it published in relation to love and relationships can be seen in the regularly published "Letters to the Editor" department. Here, readers had a chance to express their thoughts and reactions to specific articles that had been published in previous months. While the magazine surely had the luxury of cherry-picking which letters they found worthy of publication, the section featured an average of two responses per article. Articles having to do with love and marriage, however, often received various responses, sometimes spanning pages. Within this department, there are many trends that can be identified.

Unsurprisingly, *Ebony's* readers often responded positively to articles about happily married couples, especially when one spouse or the other evoked ideals of a Christian marriage. Take, for instance, the response to an article profiling the relationship of Smokey and Claudette Robinson after 22 years of marriage. The October 1982 cover story explored how the couple overcame the pressures of fame, and especially how they dealt with the attention of adoring fans. In the article, Claudette shared their formula for a successful marriage, stating that "marriages are made in heaven" and when you "put Him first He will handle the problems." For the

[81] *Ibid.,* 26.

Robinsons, having a strong sense of faith, love, trust, and respect were the most important factors in making their marriage work.[82]

In December 1982, the publication featured letters to the editor that commented on this article. Of the 6 responses published, all commented on the religious aspects of Claudette's comments, admiring the couple's ability to keep God at the forefront of their relationship. It is in these comments that one can discern a common trend that occurs in *Ebony* throughout the decade. While the advice from *Ebony's* own journalists was often secular in nature, the feature stories of couples like the Robinsons still allowed for the publication to include content that encouraged Christian values. The responses shared in the "Letters to the Editor" department indicate that *Ebony's* readers were especially receptive to the magazine's use of celebrity couples to send messages of Christian piety and morality, despite their tendency to lean more towards secular relationship advice. For these readers, *Ebony's* discussions of love and Christian marriage were inspirational and reaffirmed their own religious beliefs.

Some readers found the magazine to be particularly helpful in starting necessary conversations within their own relationships. Victoria Walker wrote in to the magazine after her husband asked her to read Dr. Alvin Poussaint's "What Every Black Woman Should Know About Black Men." Poussaint argued that the disconnect between black women and black men was partially due to the inability of black women to "understand and appreciate the nature of the pressures on Black men burdened with achieving manhood in a racist society."[83] He went on to state that the experience of black men in America is uniquely painful and requires the support of the black woman in order to survive. After reading the article, Mrs. Walker wrote to *Ebony,*

[82]Trudy S. Moore, "Smokey and Claudette Robinson," *Ebony,* October 1982, 120.

[83]Alvin Poussaint, "What Every Black Woman Should Know About Black Men," *Ebony,* August, 1982.

asserting, “now I realize that I have wronged my black man.” Though brief, the letter makes it clear that after agreeing with the words of Dr. Poussaint, Mr. Walker gave the article to his wife because he felt it adequately articulated how he felt as a black man and what he needed from his wife. For the Walkers, the article was a starting point for them to begin working on their marriage, and once taken seriously the suggestions directly led to a stronger marriage. Their story is one of many examples of readers who articulated positive results after taking heed of *Ebony’s* advice, contributing to the publications legitimacy and position as a relevant voice on black romantic relationships.

Reactions to *Ebony’s* articles were not always positive, and many readers were often quite critical of the suggestions, even by some of the most popular journalists. The “Letters to the Editor” department included these perspectives as well, and in some cases even gave a voice to other “experts” who had varying opinions on controversial topics. Whether it was to point out the failure of an article about changes in the Navy to mention the legal field, or to voice frustration with silences in the magazine’s coverage of the drug crisis, scholars and professionals often wrote in to critique *Ebony’s* coverage of topics in which they were well versed. When it came to the advice about romantic relations between black men and women, couples like the Walkers found “What Black Women Need to Know About Black Men” to be compelling. Alternatively, a Dr. Mark Hyman was extremely disappointed in Poussaint’s analysis. Hyman believed that “this recent battle between Black men and Black women is programmed by the system and designed to destroy black people.” In his response, he argued that the disconnect between black men and women was a recent phenomenon and a systematic problem. Hyman was

disappointed that Poussaint and others frequently abandoned this in their advice and suggested that rather than blaming the individual larger forces must be examined.[84]

[84]"Letters to the Editor," *Ebony*, November 1982, 21.

CONCLUSION

As historian Kevin Gaines points out in his work around black respectability, the problem with racial uplift ideology is the subconscious internalized racism.[85] In an effort to provide the tools that would ease gender relations and thus result in the preservation of the black family, *Ebony* often published work that was dangerously close to the pathologizing rhetoric of conservatives of the twentieth century. They perpetuated the idea that the black family was in "crisis" because of a lack of stable two-parent households and growing tensions in romantic relationships between black men and black women. Instead of pointing to the impact of the war on drugs, increased homicide rates that were a direct symptom of poverty, and institutional racism, the black male shortage was discussed as if it was a spontaneous biological phenomenon. When the magazine could have been providing solutions to increase the black male population through prison reform and a more rational drug policy, it simply told its female readers that they were not looking hard enough. Rather than highlighting the institutional barriers that kept black men from obtaining education at rates comparable to black women, writers and experts urged black women to abandon their desires for romantic partners that would contribute to their social and economic mobility. When discussing the increased rates of single mothers, the magazine lacked a rich analysis of the commitment to the family that caused black fathers to desert them. As many researchers have pointed out, the inability of public programs to support two-parent

[85]Gaines, *Uplifting the Race,* 42.

households and feelings of inadequacy that arose when black men were not able to provide for their family financially were often factors contributing to desertion.[86]

Ebony undoubtedly contributed to the wave of self-help books and manuals that appeared on the market in the following decade. In some instances, it even served as a launching pad for some of the most successful works of this kind. Julia Hare's 1992 relationship manual, *How to Keep a BMW: Black Man Working,* was legitimized not only by her relationship with renowned psychologist Nathan Hare, but also by the years of contributions in *Ebony* magazine on the same subjects.[87] The trend of publishing relationship advice geared towards black audiences that focused on individual shortcomings rather than larger societal structures has continued into the 21st century. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, conversations about black sexual politics are worth having, but require true engagement with scholarly sources and statistical data. Impassioned writings drawing from personal frustration touted as advice, like the work of author Monte Maddox, flooded the market, silencing analytical works by actual experts in the field.[88] As Johnson and Losocco state, "Our intersectional narrative suggests that rather than blaming Black couples or individuals, as pundits, politicians, and spouses are quick to do, it is important to recognize that there is a racialized and gendered institutional and cultural apparatus that makes it particularly difficult for Black couples to have lasting" relationships.[89]The onus cannot solely be placed on the individual.

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[86]Coontz *The Way We Never Were*, Jones *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*

[87]See Julia Hare, *How to Find and Keep a BMW: Black Man Working.* San Francisco: The Black Think Tank 1992.

[88]Monte Maddox, *What's Wrong With Black Women*

[89]Kecia R. Johnson, and Karyn Loscocco. "Black Marriage Through the Prism of Gender, Race, and Class." *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 142-71. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572942.149

Exploring *Ebony's* discourse on black romantic love and relationships has implications for contemporary conversations about black families and dating relationships. As statistical evidence suggests, many of the "problems" that *Ebony* highlighted in the 1980s have not improved. While the male shortage has worsened, there is a wider gap in educational attainment between black men and black women.[90] There are still ongoing conversations about the unrealistic standards of black women, their inability to understand the unique troubles of black men, and the desire for black men to be equal contributors in the home.[91] The persistence of these conversations over the last 40 years suggests that failure to address systematic causes of these problems in lieu of suggesting solutions that may work for select individuals has been largely ineffective. Sociologists have charted the correlation between a decline in the economy and marriage rates; however *Ebony* attributes this decline to a misunderstanding of the sexes.[92] Black women are still less likely to get married, and marriages between black women and black men are more likely to end in divorce.[93] Black marriages are still under different pressure than their white counterparts because of the stress of racism.[94] This research can contribute to a truly multifaceted and generative discussion about the ways systematic racism has permeated the inner

[90]"Of the African Americans completing degrees in higher education African American women earn approximately 75 % of bachelor's degrees, 70% of Master's degrees, 60% of doctorates, and are approximately 62% of law school enrollments in the top 50 law schools." See: Rebecca Wanzo, "Black Love Is Not a Fairy Tale: African American Women, Romance, and Rhetoric." *Poroi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Rhetorical Analysis & Invention* 7 (2011): 1–18. https://auth.lib.unc.edu/ezproxy_auth.php?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=66666135&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[91]Monte Maddox's work, *What's Wrong With Black Women* provides a scathing indictment of black women, rooted in the frustrations that he, a black man, has experienced while dating. Published in 2002, Maddox's work is an intriguing example of the popular literature that is produced to address this issue.

[92]Hunter, *Bound in Wedlock,* 417.

[93]Johnson, and Loscocco." Black Marriages," 149.

[94]*Ibid*., 153

lives of black people and their romantic relationships. It also encourages an inclusion of identities and family structures ignored in *Ebony,* and commonly left out of contemporary discourse.

At it's inception, the goal of *Ebony* magazine was to showcase stories of black success, and provide positive depictions of African Americans in a media landscape that they were commonly excluded from. An exploration of *Ebony* in the 1980's makes it clear that the publication was still successfully accomplishing this goal. Although they were at times quite candid about the areas for improvement within the black community, the publication still served as a source of hope and inspiration for many of it's readers. While the publication may not have always gotten it right when diagnosing the problems that black singles and black couples faced, they remained dedicated to showing the "lighter side of Negro life". Despite the challenges that arose, the magazine constantly reinforced the idea that black love was still alive and well. The responses of its readers, its commercial success, and longevity in a time that was particularly hard for large-scale publications, demonstrates the ability to the Johnson publishing company to appeal to it's readers. Time and time again, issue after issue, the one constant was the outpour of letters to the editor where readers discussed how the publication continued to inspire them, revive them, and give them hope. In this way Ebony can continue to be a model as these conversations extend into the 21st century. At the core of the publication is proof that providing prescriptive advice and the issues that exist within public discourse does not mean abandoning the joys and triumphs that exist within the black community.

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